

Summary of

IPS Closed-Door Discussion: “Towards a Media Industry Freelancers Grouping”

17 August 2010

Conference Room, Oei Tiong Ham Building

By Cheong Kah Shin, IPS Research Assistant

The Institute of Policy Studies held a closed-door discussion on the possibility of forming a grouping of freelancers from the media industries. Such a group, which could be in the form of a trade association, society or union, would champion the rights of freelancers and handle other issues such as welfare, training, industry development and representing freelancers in dealings with government and other entities. The discussion, held at the request of the Media Development Authority, was attended by about forty participants who are freelancers (such as directors, writers, actors, and others), government representatives and officials from the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). The media sector in Singapore consists of several industries, including television broadcast and production; publishing and printing; film; music; and interactive and digital media.

In his opening remarks, Mr Tan Tarn How, Senior Research Fellow at IPS, said that this meeting aimed to bring together freelancers, including those who were leading initiatives by freelancers coming together as formal or ad-hoc groups. It is hoped that the discussion would lead to the eventual formation of an industry-wide grouping of freelancers that would be sustainable in the long-run, he said.

The following are summaries of the presentations made:

- 1) Ms Audrey Wong, Nominated Member of Parliament and programme leader at LASALLE College of the Arts, highlighted some problems plaguing freelancers today. In several meetings she has held as an arts Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP), the most pressing issues raised were companies not paying freelancers in time or at all, the lack of insurance for freelancers when on assignments, the lack of awareness regarding contractual rights and legal protection, and the dearth of accreditation and training opportunities. She observed that freelancers were “individualistic” and doubted they

could come together to form a cohesive freelancers association in the near future despite these pressing problems. Even if one materialises, media houses and the authorities would also need to change their mindsets for the freelancers grouping to be successful, she added.

- 2) Mr Kenneth Cheong and Ms Karen Teoh, who have been involved in a ground-up effort to set up a freelancer's professional association, also listed similar problems as Ms Wong. Mr Cheong, who is an independent filmmaker and trainer, proposed a grouping that will address these issues. Some items on its agenda include standard mandatory contracts between freelancers and companies, group insurance, a virtual intellectual property rights bank, training courses and talent accreditation. He also suggested a media school recruitment drive and word-of-mouth invitations to solicit members for the grouping. In addition, he called for the government to support the professional association. Ms Teoh, a lawyer by training, was concerned that Singapore lacked international feature films and hence could not generate "supernormal profits" to sustain a vibrant media industry. This led to high attrition rates in the freelance industry, she said. Emphasising the need for a representative grouping, she also noted that freelancers would have to sacrifice time and hence income to manage the collective's affairs.
- 3) Ms Goh Su Lin, spoke about Six Degrees, a network of creative individuals started by the non-profit organisation, Emily Hill. Ms Goh, who is a director of Emily Hill, said that seed funding for Six Degrees came from the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA). She quoted statistics from MICA which polled freelancers on key challenges in the industry and what kind of assistance they might prefer in order to tackle these issues. Six Degrees had held discussions with freelancers of various specialisations to discuss its initiatives. It had found out that there were over forty networks such as the Screenwriters Association of Singapore and the Association of Singapore Actors in the "very fragmented" media industry. Some of Six Degrees' current and proposed activities include professional development courses, community networking events, client-to-freelancer tie-ups, an Internet portal and a platform for artistic collaborations. Six Degrees is a for-profit company, and its revenues come from services provided to its members, which now totals about a hundred members.

- 4) Mr P Balachandran, legal advisor to trade association Singapore Infocomm Technology Federation (SITF), suggested that freelancers organise themselves into a society as this form of grouping would involve minimal cost and reporting issues. The Microcomputer Trade Association of Singapore (MTAS) was a model association that freelancers could replicate, he said. Much like freelancers with a variety of trades, MTAS members represented various trades in the information communication technology industry. MTAS has sub-committees to champion the interests of each trade; these societies also represented their trades vis-à-vis government and third parties. MTAS is funded by annual public events like the SITEX computer show, and has a full-time secretariat. The association had to negotiate for equitable contracts for its members and provide accreditation via partnerships with external parties, he said. He also noted that a blacklist of debtors, published monthly, was particularly useful in tackling non-payment issues.

- 5) Mr Teo Thiam Chye, Programme Director from the Media Development Authority (MDA), said the discussion needed to go beyond freelancers' difficulties in getting payment and other bread and butter issues. The focus should instead be on working towards looking for a solution like forming an industry-wide grouping to represent their interest. This industry-wide grouping could look into the bread and butter issues as well as address the challenges facing the freelancers including profession upgrading, training, business and welfare issues. Mr Teo emphasised that the freelancers grouping was not an MDA initiative. He elaborated that the freelancers must want to set up this grouping to represent their interests. The MDA, on its part, would be prepared to support a well organised grouping with "a critical mass", representing freelancers across the seven, or enough, sectors of the media industries, he said. Echoing the views of the other freelancers, Mr Teo agreed that a group run by volunteers would not last as they may not be able to commit the time nor have the resources to manage effectively. Hence, the MDA would consider providing some funding to support a full-time secretariat in the initial stages. He urged the freelancers present to get together after the Roundtable Discussion to discuss in further details if the grouping was a viable option towards resolving their problems. If so, they may wish to raise a proposal and submit to MDA for support consideration.

Discussion

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Senior Research Fellow, chaired the discussion. He highlighted some common issues reiterated by different presenters: ensuring the legal rights of freelancers, developing the industry for freelancing, as well as the need for more welfare training and accreditation for freelancers. He noted that freelancers had to network not only among themselves but with external parties like industry players and the government. A grouping will then be able to represent them collectively.

During the hour-long discussion that followed, the following points were made:

- *The nature of a trade union in Singapore*

A participant clarified the nature of a trade union under NTUC. She said that Singapore's unions were organised according to industries, such as chemicals or construction, and not trades. A full member of a union has to be an employee of a company, while anyone who is not an employee can join only as a general member. Full members are entitled to collective bargaining rights, while general members are not and are only entitled to receiving legal advice from NTUC, she said. As freelancers are by definition not employees of any company, they would not have the right of full members under existing union laws, she added.

- *The failure of standard contracts and volunteer burn-out*

Another participant spoke from her experience as a member of the Association of Singapore Actors (ASA) and the Singapore Drama Educators Association (SDEA). ASA had tried insisting on standard mandatory contracts between companies and actors, but that did not work out as employers had refused to sign such contracts. Furthermore, freelancers undercut each another in the fees they charged. A paid secretariat was important to keep an association going because volunteers will soon give up due to the amount of work required of them, she said. This was one reason for the relative success of the SDEA, which had a part-time but paid manager, as compared to the ASA, which was run entirely by volunteers.

- *Declining standards of media education and problems with the existing media structure*

A participant suggested that declining standards of media education and problems with the existing media structure contributed to high attrition rates among practitioners. He said that Mediacorp, the biggest employer of media freelancers, provides bread-and-butter jobs but little

opportunity for satisfying work due to falling in-house standards. The community should focus their energies on solving these problems instead, he added.

- *Possibilities for funds distribution*

A participant said that a large industry-wide grouping would take a long time to establish, while smaller groupings might struggle for funding meanwhile. He suggested that the MDA could distribute its funds among existing groupings, instead of disbursing a large sum to an industry-wide grouping at one go. Despite its challenges, the same participant then concluded the session by expressing faith in the possibility of a freelancers grouping.

In his closing remarks, Mr Tan Tarn How noted that the MDA has made a commitment to financially provide seed support for a workable freelancers grouping, and it is now up to freelancers to organise themselves so that the much-needed grouping could become reality.



© Copyright 2010 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.